

Ground Squirrels

Ground squirrels are present in most agricultural and rural areas throughout California. They are found around buildings, gardens and industrial sites, as well as in natural areas.

BIOLOGY

The California ground squirrel is found in most areas except the Mojave Desert and is distinguished by its somewhat bushy tail.

Ground squirrels live in a wide variety of natural habitats. They usually avoid thick chaparral and dense woods, as well as very moist areas. They live in colonies of 2 to 20 or more animals. Much of their time is spent underground in burrows, where they sleep, rest, rear young, store some food and escape danger.

Ground squirrels are active during the day and are easily seen, especially in warm weather from spring to fall. During winter months, most ground squirrels hibernate, but it is not uncommon for some young to remain active, especially in areas where winters are not so severe. Most adults go into a summer hibernation (estivation) during the hottest parts of the year.

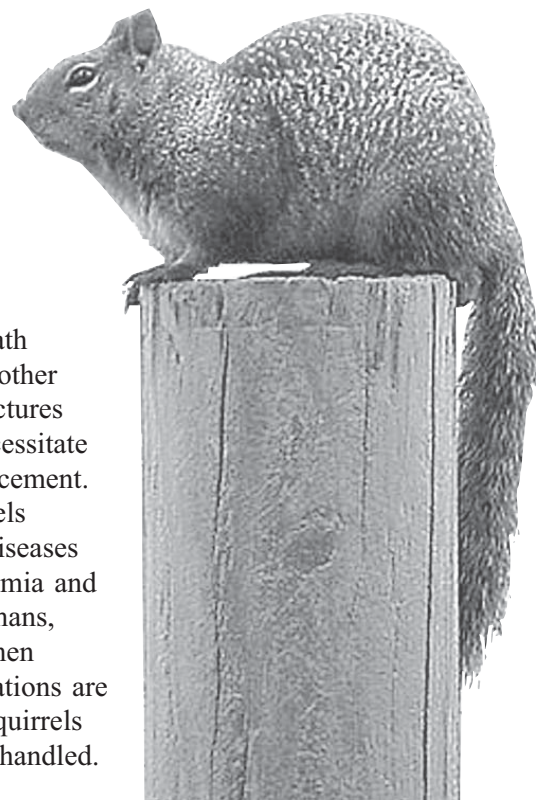
Ground squirrels are primarily vegetarians. During early spring, they consume mainly green vegetation such as grasses and forbs. When the vegetation begins to dry up, squirrels eat seeds, grains and nuts and begin to store food. Squirrels eat fruits and vegetables and are known to eat or gnaw bark from bushes and trees.

DAMAGE

Ground squirrels damage crops as well as other food-bearing and ornamental plants. Particularly vulnerable are all types of grains, fruits and nuts such as almonds, apples, apricots, peaches, pistachios, prunes, oranges, tomatoes and walnuts. Young shrubs, vines and trees are damaged by gnawing bark, girdling trunks, and eating twigs and leaves. Squirrels even gnaw surface-type plastic irrigation pipe.

Burrowing can be quite destructive. Ground squirrels frequently burrow around trees and shrubs, damaging the root system and sometimes killing the plants.

Burrows beneath buildings and other manmade structures sometimes necessitate repair or replacement. Ground squirrels can transmit diseases (such as tularemia and plague) to humans, particularly when squirrel populations are dense. Dead squirrels should not be handled.



CONTROL

Removing brushpiles and debris makes an area less desirable to ground squirrels, makes detection of their burrows easier, aids in monitoring the population and improves access during control operations.

Note: Dogs may prevent squirrels from entering small areas, but they cannot control squirrel populations.

Trapping is a practical means of controlling ground squirrels in small areas. Live-catch traps are effective but present the problem of disposal of live squirrels. *Because ground squirrels carry diseases and are agricultural pests, it is illegal to release them elsewhere.*

There are several types of traps that kill ground squirrels. Most types should be placed on the ground near squirrel burrows or runways. Walnuts, almonds, oats, barley and melon rinds are attractive trap baits. Bait should be placed well behind or tied to the trigger.



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